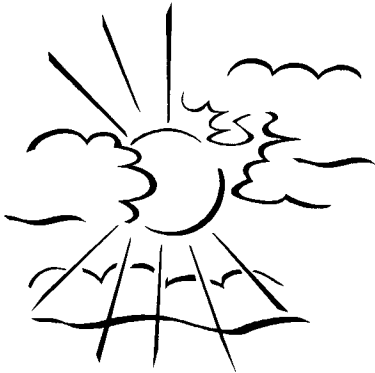


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Articles in Today's Clips

Monday, March 6, 2006

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Michigan stumbles in efforts to make childhood safe

Sunday, March 05, 2006

By Sharon Emery
Lansing Bureau

LANSING -- Although only his killer knew it then, 7-year-old Ricky Holland was already dead when an investigator from the state Office of Children's Ombudsman last year outlined for lawmakers how Michigan's child welfare system was a disaster waiting to happen.

Searchers in Ricky's hometown east of Lansing spent the Labor Day weekend hoping the boy, who had reportedly run away in early July, would soon be found.

The next day, Sept. 6, the OCO's Stacie Bladen testified before a Senate committee reviewing lapses in the foster care system that her agency's investigation of complaints over six years had consistently found caseworkers' inability to do everything required of them to be a critical problem.

"The OCO cannot over-emphasize the need to decrease worker and supervisor caseloads to a manageable ratio," Bladen said of measures necessary to remedy workers' failure to follow law or policy. "... Given current resources, sometimes even the most skilled and well-intentioned foster care worker cannot meet performance expectations."

Ricky's body was recovered in January and his adoptive parents, who had also been his foster parents, have been charged with murder.

The ombudsman's office is expected to issue a report this spring on what went wrong in the case, which included previous allegations of abuse.

But Bladen's outline of years of findings by the Office of Children's Ombudsman -- created in 1994 to independently investigate complaints about Michigan's child welfare system -- indicates they already know.

Time and again, in about 65 percent of the cases the agency investigates and determines findings in, a Department of Human Services caseworker is cited for failure to comply with policies or law. And workers regularly fail for three key reasons:

Insufficient supervisory oversight or support,

Lack of training/knowledge,

Lack of training/knowledge,

Caseload/workload issues.

"Whenever a child dies there's a crisis," said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, of the Michigan League for Human Services, a Lansing policy group. "Everyone is trying to find out who's to blame."

She worries that the focus on the Holland case could divert attention from broader needs.

"The ability of the state (to help abused and neglected children) is being compromised on all levels, there's just no question," Zehnder-Merrell said.

She points to a Kids Count in Michigan study that found a 41 percent increase in confirmed child abuse and neglect cases from 1995 to 2004. Meanwhile, cutbacks have virtually eliminated DHS prevention services targeted at families with unsubstantiated abuse and neglect, according to the report.

Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm has requested 51 more children's protective services workers in the 2007 budget being negotiated with lawmakers. DHS officials say they need about 130 more. In foster care, they say they need about 190 more.

But some Republican lawmakers are unconvinced that the 15-to-1 staffing levels recommended by child welfare groups are really necessary. And they question whether the department effectively uses its resources.

Sen. Bill Hardiman, R-Kentwood, who heads the Senate subcommittee on DHS spending, says he sympathizes with calls for more staffing -- to a point.

"I'm willing to consider that we may need more caseworkers, but at the same time we have to look at all of the state's needs," Hardiman said.

In addition, changes in law and policy that require family contact standards, court hearings and mandated investigations, for example, also have added to the work load, Udow said.

Amid the uproar, Detroit's Verlie Ruffin won unanimous Senate approval Thursday to become the children's ombudsman, a post she assumed in late January after being appointed by Granholm.

Ruffin, who has worked in child welfare for nearly 30 years, stressed the autonomy of her office during her confirmation hearing, noting the Legislature was "very wise" in setting up the office as an independent agency.

"Accountability is No. 1 for this agency," Ruffin said. "We're here to serve children and their well-being," not a political agenda.

The Office of Children's Ombudsman was created under former Gov. John Engler to investigate complaints regarding children involved with DHS and private agencies for reasons of abuse and neglect. During the most recent annual reporting period ending Sept. 30, 2004, the OCO received 801 complaints and inquiries involving 1,419 children from nearly every county.

The agency ultimately issued 237 reports of findings and recommendations, which result when DHS fails to comply with policy or law, or its actions and decisions are not consistent with the case facts or the child's best interest.

Most were for failure to comply with policies or law, a problem also cited by the state Auditor General's Office. For instance, caseworkers have regularly failed to make required contacts with parents and children over several reporting periods. Inadequate supervisory oversight of caseworkers' reports has also been regularly cited.

The long-standing problems lead some to question whether the state is itself guilty of neglecting children even as it tries to rescue them from such abuse at the hands of their families.

"... placing children into state custody is a significant governmental intervention with far-reaching human consequences," the OCO's Bladen told lawmakers. "Therefore, the government bears a special responsibility for children placed in state care."

Michigan

Prosecution goal: Prove boy's abuse

Preliminary exam set to resume today

March 6, 2006

BY JACK KRESNAK
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Ricky Holland's remains were found in January. The 7-year-old's parents have been charged with murder.

Ingham County prosecutors face daunting challenges in trying to prove that Ricky Holland's parents abused him mentally and physically.

They contend that the 7-year-old boy -- whose skeletal remains were found near Williamston in January -- was abused for more than three years before he was killed.

During the first four days of a preliminary examination for Ricky's parents, Tim and Lisa Holland, Ingham County Prosecutor Assistant Michael Ferency called witnesses who said they suspected Ricky was being abused -- and others who said they never thought Ricky was being mistreated.

The preliminary examination is to resume today in 55th District Court in Mason before Judge Rosemarie Aquilina.

Ferency's job is made more difficult because witnesses who said they did not suspect abuse are highly qualified specialists -- a child psychiatrist, a clinical social worker at his school and a school psychologist. The people who testified that they thought Ricky's mom was hurting him are low-level employees with high school educations.

Ricky, described as a bright, personable child who was afraid of nothing, apparently never told anyone that his parents hurt him -- only that they didn't want him. That statement came months after the Hollands moved from Jackson and Cascades Elementary School to Williamston in neighboring Ingham County.

An unusually large number of witnesses, about 28, are scheduled to appear in court over several days.

The hearing is to determine whether a crime was committed and whether there is probable cause to believe that the Hollands committed it.

Lisa Holland and her husband, Tim Holland, of Williamston are charged with first-degree murder in Ricky's death. Each has accused the other of killing the boy, who disappeared in July. A key issue is Ricky's medical records. Aquilina agreed that they should be entered into evidence despite the objections of the Hollands' defense attorneys. Ferency, who has at least two members of Prosecutor Stuart Dunnings' staff close at hand, had not seen the complete records before Friday but is hoping they show that Ricky, a petite child who ate voraciously when he was at school, was being starved by his parents.

The prosecutor also is working to show that Lisa Holland manipulated a child psychiatrist at Jackson's Foote Hospital to misdiagnose Ricky as being emotionally impaired and having a

bipolar mood disorder. Ferency says that this was a scheme to get money through Social Security benefits or an adoption subsidy for special needs children from the state of Michigan.

But, so far, the evidence has been contradictory.

"The prosecutor's theory on this case has taken more evolutions than Darwin," said one of Lisa Holland's two attorneys, Andrew Abood.

On Friday, the prosecutor called the clinical social worker and the school psychologist who evaluated Ricky for special education status at Lisa Holland's request in March 2004. They said Ricky was doing good work at school despite exhibiting eating food from trashcans and stealing food from other children. They did not find that he qualified for special education status.

When that status was denied, Lisa Holland removed Ricky from Cascades, saying she was going to home school him because of his behavior problems.

Linda Spisak, a certified social worker with a master's degree in social work, and school psychologist Suzanne Leach testified that they saw no signs that Ricky was being abused. He behaved well in school -- outside of his stealing food and lying about it. But they were concerned that Ricky never showed any of the symptoms that Lisa Holland had reported, including aggressiveness, temper tantrums and violent outbursts.

The child psychiatrist, Dr. Aurif Abedi, who saw the boy 30 times over about three years, diagnosed the boy as having a slew of conditions -- attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder, oppositional-defiant disorder, impulse control disorder, intermittent explosive disorder and bipolar mood disorder.

Abedi prescribed several medications for Ricky, including Ritalin, and wrote notes to the school at Lisa Holland's request describing his behaviors and suggesting the use of a harness restraint while the boy rode the school bus.

The bus driver and bus aide testified that they didn't think Ricky needed to be restrained. Both testified that they felt Lisa Holland mistreated Ricky.

Suzanne Leach, a school psychologist for Jackson Public Schools, said she did not see any signs that Ricky had mood swings.

Aquilina said she ordered the medical records released because of inconsistencies.

"We need to get to the bottom of it," Aquilina said.

Contact **JACK KRESNAK** at 313-223-4544 or jkresnak@freepress.com.

Published March 6, 2006

Verdict in: All of Michigan had a role in tragedy of Ricky's life

A Lansing State Journal editorial

The magnitude of the guilt in Ricky Holland's death mounts with each revelation stemming from the ongoing prosecution of his adoptive parents.

But this isn't about the two people in Ingham County court. A judge and jury will determine their fate.

Outside the courtroom, though, the evidence is in: Michigan is guilty, every single one of us.

In the last two weeks, here's some of what the public has learned about Ricky Holland, the 7-year-old whose disappearance sparked a massive search before it was finally learned that the boy was long dead:

- A nurse from a Jackson school testified that Ricky begged not to be sent home with his mother. She also testified that she reported small bruises on Ricky to Child Protective Services.
- Two pathologists told the media that Ricky's body exhibited a pattern of abuse in his face and upper body.
- The state Department of Human Services apparently received repeated reports about abuse.

It seems impossible that the people of Michigan could look on this case and not be pushed into action by the guilt for what was done or not done in their name. Yet, such seems to be the case.

In the wake of Ricky's death, Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the Legislature have engaged in political finger-pointing. Granholm tried to argue the Legislature had failed to move on requests for child protection resources. Lawmakers pointed out that Granholm had only recently asked for more caseworkers, forcing the governor to backtrack.

Last week, House Speaker Craig DeRoche created a special committee to review the state's child protection services. Hmm. Wasn't the Legislature already charged with such oversight - with or without a committee?

Meanwhile, the rest of us carry on with our lives. We may shake our heads or tut-tut about these courtroom revelations. But when push comes to shove, what is the public going to do after being shown that children in our charge can simply fall through the cracks?

A child is dead. He can suffer no more. But there are more children out there. And they can suffer still.

Will we let them?

Published March 4, 2006

Two testify they didn't think Ricky was abused Social worker said boy bonded with his parents

By Kevin Grasha
Lansing State Journal

MASON - A school psychologist and social worker who evaluated Ricky Holland while he attended school in Jackson said Friday they did not suspect anyone was abusing him.

Social worker Linda Spisak also testified she thought Ricky seemed to have bonded well with his adopted parents, who are charged with murder in the 7-year-old's death.

"(Ricky) said he loved his mother and he especially loved his dad," Spisak told defense attorney Frank Reynolds.

The testimony came during the fourth day of Lisa and Tim Holland's preliminary hearing in 55th District Court. The hearing will determine whether the case will advance to trial.

Tim Holland reported Ricky missing July 2. His remains were found seven months later.

The Hollands lived in Jackson, where Ricky attended Cascades Elementary School, before moving to Williamston in May 2005.

Under questioning by Assistant Prosecutor Mike Ferency, Spisak said she didn't think Ricky had severe emotional or developmental problems, despite what Lisa Holland continually told her.

Ferency said in court that the Hollands misstated and exaggerated Ricky's symptoms and conditions - part of a pattern of emotional abuse.

Spisak, who evaluated Ricky in March 2004 at Lisa Holland's request, said the mother's depiction of Ricky didn't match the friendly, bright boy she knew.

She described, for example, how Ricky was excited that his mother was several months pregnant and that he would have a new sibling. But Lisa Holland told Spisak she was "concerned to leave Ricky alone with a new baby because she was worried if she turned her back on Ricky he would harm (the baby)."

Lisa Holland removed Ricky from the school before Spisak could do further observations, the social worker testified.

Jackson school psychologist Suzanne Leach also testified that she didn't always see the behavior Lisa Holland described.

"I felt like Ricky had a lot of positive attributes that were being overlooked," Leach said.

Lisa Holland's co-counsel Mike Nichols challenged her testimony, saying a licensed psychiatrist who testified earlier in the week and diagnosed Ricky with at least four conditions was more of an expert.

Sparrow forensic pathologist Dr. Joyce DeJong, who was expected to testify Friday about Ricky's autopsy, now is scheduled to take the stand next week. She has said that the condition of Ricky's remains made it impossible to determine exactly how or when he died.

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'The most vulnerable population'

Sunday, March 05, 2006

By Scott Hagen
shagen@citpat.com -- 768-4929

It's hard for the man to talk about what happened to his 6-year-old daughter without breaking into tears.

He first found out about a year ago last week that someone had sexually molested her.

"Our family knew something was wrong with her the way she had been acting," said the father, whose name is not being used to protect the child. "She was outgoing, very spirited, just a beautiful girl. Then she got quiet. Cried all the time."

The family would later learn the mother's boyfriend, Geemes Hamilton, whom she had dated for three years, took advantage of his time alone with the girl to molest her. Now, Hamilton is in prison, convicted of second-degree criminal sexual conduct.

"I went through the hurt and the pain of being in love with someone who could do something like that," said the mother. "Never in a million years would I have guessed he could do something like that."

Police repeat the message again and again: Be mindful of who is watching your children -- and that includes screening trusted friends and family members. Parents should also coach children to speak up if they ever feel mistreated.

Last year, the Jackson County Prosecutor's Office authorized charges of criminal sexual conduct on a victim younger than 13 against 23 people. Prosecutor Hank Zavislak said this number is typical of recent years. This year, in the span of five days in late February, two men in separate cases were arrested on charges of sexually assaulting 5-year-old girls.

In both cases, the children shared stories with police about how the men allegedly lured them into sex. But many incidents involving children never come to light, experts say.

"They're the most vulnerable population," said Teresa Mahaffey, sexual assault coordinator at the AWARE Shelter. "They don't have the resources to be able to protect themselves."

Often, once a predator targets a child, a grooming process begins. They buy the children toys or candy, or take them to fun places. The goal: Earn the child's trust, then induce sexuality.

A 5-year-old in a Feb. 22 Blackman Township case told police that Timothy Watson, who was living with the girl and her mother after his release from prison last December, bought her Barbie dolls and took her to McDonald's. Then, when the mother wasn't home, he forced intercourse on her, she told police.

When victims are children, it is difficult for them to distinguish between right and wrong. They are often threatened to ensure their silence.

But sometimes, the child will make a comment that arouses suspicion, or behave in a way inconsistent with normal youth. Then the truth will come tumbling out. Other times, the secrets are kept.

Mahaffey said parents should talk to their children about speaking up when they feel they have been in an uncomfortable position, or when people ask them to keep secrets.

Only when accounts of assaults are told to police can the justice system work, she said.

Assistant Prosecutor Allison Bates once called a 3-year-old to the witness stand to testify about the sexual trauma she endured.

Zavislak said his office gets some type of conviction in nearly every sexual abuse case. He said plea bargains are offered only when a victim does not want to testify.

Bates has worked with sexual-assault victims for 15 years and said few cases shock her.

She said victims can have lingering effects. The boys tend to act in sexually inappropriate ways against other children. Girls end up in abusive relationships and are promiscuous.

"The victim of child molestation will live with that for the rest of their lives," she said. "It affects every aspect of their lives. In some ways, a child-molestation case almost causes more lasting damage than a homicide case."

Vicki Schultz, executive director at Catholic Charities, said the community needs to educate itself about who is living in their neighborhoods.

Schultz, whose organization works with sexual predators once they're out of prison, said legislative measures designed to strengthen restrictions on sex offenders could help prevent future assaults.

"I think it takes the whole community to become educated and aware of this. That's going to help in the long run," she said

For the father whose daughter endured Hamilton's sexual abuse, the past year has been hell. He thinks 10 times a day, at least, about what happened.

"She's getting back to where she was, but she still fears him. You say his name and she'll break down and just start bawling," he said. "There'll be a day when this will start to heal up. And I hope I never do see him. Because I'll probably hurt him."

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 2, 2006

Granholm Signs Bill Giving Citizens New Tool to Help Protect Themselves and Their Children

LANSING – Governor Jennifer M. Granholm today signed legislation that provides Michigan citizens with a new tool to help them protect both themselves and their children from potential sexual predators. The new law will allow people to sign up for email notifications when a registered sex offender moves into their zip code.

“As a parent, I know how essential it is to have information about the safety of the neighborhoods where my family lives and where my children attend school,” said Granholm. “Notifying citizens when a sex offender moves into the neighborhood is one more tool our families can use to help keep themselves and their children safe.”

Public Act XX, signed by the Governor today, requires the Michigan State Police (MSP) to create a subscriber system that provides electronic notification, via email, whenever a registered sex offender moves into the designated zip code. Interested individuals will be required to register for this service once the law takes effect.

Currently, information on the state’s sex offender registry is available to the public and searchable by zip code, but a person must either go to the MSP web page or visit their local law enforcement agency to receive information about registered offenders living nearby. In order to ensure they have current information, a person must check either the web page or local law enforcement office regularly.

Senate Bill 128 was sponsored by Senator Alan Sanborn (R-Richmond Township). The legislation takes effect on January 1, 2007.

ON GUARD ONLINE

Safety Net

Stacey Range
Lansing State Journal

"Davidmbdave" seems to want just one thing from the 14-year-old girl.

After 66 minutes of mostly mundane chat, the 44-year-old Muskegon-area man types in the magic word: "sex."

"What is your favorite position? ... I think you would like ..."

Only the girl isn't a girl at all. "Davidmbdave" is having cybersex with Special Agent James May of the state Attorney General's Office. May grins and his brown eyes sparkle in a gotcha sort of way.

"There's guys like this on the Net every day," May said, shaking his head. "There's no way we'll get them all, but every one we catch keeps at least one more kid safe."

May got one more Thursday with the arrest of David Michael Braley, who authorities believe is "davidmbdave." It marks the 82nd arrest by the state's elite Child and Public Protection Unit since it was charged in 2003 with capturing Internet predators.

Other law enforcement agencies have been arresting suspected Internet predators, including the arrest two weeks ago by Emmett Township police of a Battle Creek man, Brian M. Woodman, who thought he had arranged to meet a 14-year-old girl at Kimball Pines Park but was greeted by officers instead, police said.

The arrests highlight the threat lurking behind screen names on blogs, chat rooms and instant message boards. "davidmbdave" stumbled onto a fictional girl who could have just as easily been your daughter, authorities say.

The Center for Missing and Exploited Children reported 2,660 incidents last year of adults using the Internet to entice children.

A national survey suggests one in five children between 10 and 17 years of age have received sexual solicitations online. Actual figures are likely higher, experts say, because many kids don't report incidents.

The Lansing State Journal recently was granted access to the attorney general's Internet crime fighting task force. Standing over the shoulder of agents as they stalked the stalkers offered a rare view into efforts to prevent Michigan children from becoming victims. Children like Adrian Kirkpatrick, 13, of Lansing, who thinks some sexual come-ons posted on his Xanga.com Web page are from a buddy playing a prank.

His mother isn't so sure.

"How do you know who these people are?" Kristi Kirkpatrick asked her son. "I don't know and that's what makes me so scared."

OLD THREAT, NEW TOOLS

The threat isn't a new one. It's the tools and platforms that are changing. What once was a chat room phenom has spilled over into blogs, instant messaging and social Web sites like MySpace and Facebook.

"I have 11,000 volunteers working for me, and I still can't keep up. I don't know how

parents would," said Parry Aftab, a privacy lawyer and executive director of the child safety group WiredSafety.org.

The threats aren't restricted to desktops or laptops. There's a burgeoning field of venues for kids to bare their souls — and more — to strangers worldwide. Phones take and send photos and connect to the Web. PDAs transmit data with or without Internet. And those are some of the latest devices.

Giving up or locking down computers and gizmos as evil isn't the answer, Aftab said.

"If someone called your home and asked to talk to your kid, you would know how to handle that," Aftab said. "But it's once there's a mention of technology that we don't know how to handle it. Parents just need to know how to control and monitor their kids as they would anywhere else."

Local schools already are responding to recent media reports on the dangers on certain Web sites.

Last month, Okemos High School sent a newsletter to parents warning of inappropriate details and photos students posted online.

On Wednesday, Lt. Jim Wolf of the Michigan State Police talked to students at Lansing's Resurrection School about the popularity and dangers on these sites.

Teacher Kathleen Caruso requested the presentation after seeing what some of her students were posting online.

"I was really frightened," Caruso said. "Some of them had on their uniforms and had their pictures in front of the school. Predators can figure out how to get to them if they know where to find them."

The angst is real. Take the case of 14-year-old Judy Cajuste, who was found strangled and naked in January in a garbage bin in Newark, N.J. The main suspect is a man in his 20s whom Judy had met online.

WEB REALITY CHECK

Kristi Kirkpatrick only recently realized how far out of touch she had become with what her son was doing online.

When Adrian came close to failing last semester at Lansing's Otto Middle School, she started checking up on his Web whereabouts. She wasn't prepared for what she found on the eighth-grader's Xanga.com Web log. Candid and most likely exaggerated discussions about drugs, drinking and suicide. A photo of him flipping off the camera. Provocative photos of young girls. His screen name of GrimReapersSuicide. And cussing. Lots of cussing.

As if Adrian wasn't in enough trouble, she found the most alarming part of it: A handful of sexual messages from what appeared to be adult men.

"What would an adult man want to talk to my son about?"

Like many kids, Adrian says he's aware there are dangers online but he doesn't really think anything will harm him.

He laughed as he explained how he built a Web page for his 11-year-old sister and gave her a screen name of "hotnessgirl12".

"It was funny," Adrian said, smirking.

His mother wasn't amused.

"She's your little sister," Kirkpatrick said to her son. "Don't you know the message that sends to people?"

Kirkpatrick has since activated parental controls on her desktop, blocking Adrian and her

daughter, Tahja, from certain Web sites. She also limits their time online and keeps a close watch from behind.

"I know I'm supposed to trust my kids, but can I really?"

POLICING CYBERSPACE

Law enforcement officials say they are doing what they can with limited resources.

Most states have a branch of the U.S. Justice Department's Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force. Several jurisdictions, including Livingston County, also have at least one officer devoted to investigating Internet crimes.

The Michigan State Police and the Office of the Attorney General each operates stings on Internet predators. And there are plenty for both.

"We're like Columbus in the middle of the ocean," Attorney General Mike Cox said. "We pick up every one we can, but we just don't know how many more are over the horizon."

After taking office in 2003, Cox restructured the unit to focus on nabbing predators before they get to real children. Since then, 82 people have been arrested.

While Cox and his agents know that thousands more predators may be out there, they hope to deter them by publicizing the arrests.

"If they know we're out there watching, they might start to think that they don't know who is on the other end of the chat," Cox said.

One recent afternoon, Special Agent May — posing as a girl — pounded on his keyboard to keep up with three chats.

One guy from southeast Michigan wanted to know what kind of panties the girl was wearing and if she likes older men.

Another guy from western Michigan sent her a digital photo of his penis. Neither of them spent more than a few minutes before turning the chat to sex.

"davidmbdave" took little more than an hour of hedging and small talk to get sexual. He tells her he is masturbating and thinks she is, too.

"It happens a lot," May said with a slight grimace.

The profile for "davidmbdave" on Yahoo Michigan, one of many sites officials monitor, identified him as David Braley. It said he works as an assistant cook and retired from the Navy in 2000.

Braley stared at the ground and did not comment when he was arrested at his home Thursday in Roosevelt Park, a Muskegon suburb. He was charged that day with using the Internet to solicit a minor for immoral purposes, a 10-year felony.

Originally published March 5, 2006

New DPS Plan for Safety

By Brandon Truttling

Web produced by Christine Lasek

March 6, 2006

Since January, Detroit Public School students have been shot and stabbed near their schools, and staff members have been robbed inside school buildings. Thursday, the district announced a pilot program aimed at curbing the increase of school violence.

According to Detroit Schools Superintendent William Coleman, "We're treating this as a state of emergency."

With approval from the board, the district plans on spending about \$600,000 on 25-48 new school officers. These new officers will not be new to police work. The district will be interviewing laid off police officers to fill the positions.

"DPS officials will interview and select the officers, who will work on a part time basis without benefits," Superintendent Coleman explained. "We should note that these are sworn... certified police officers. They are professionals who have been laid off by the city, and are familiar with our schools and the surrounding neighborhoods."

Detroit School Board Chair Dr. Jimmy Womack said, "Under this agreement, these officers will work during those critical hours when most of the crimes have been committed, early mornings and at the end of the school day."

The new policing program will run until the end of June. The district officials are saying they are working on a long-term plan to keep students, employees, and the community safer.

Effective immediately, school officials say they have ordered metal detectors to be working, and everyone entering the school building will have to pass through one.

One concerned grandmother, Janice MaGruder, told 7 Action News, "We noticed in the mornings that there are a lot of people just standing around. So I'm thinking it will be good."

Bus drivers less than perfect

FLINT JOURNAL LETTER TO THE EDITOR

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Monday, March 06, 2006

JOURNAL READER

After reading the Feb. 24 article "Child left on bus" [Page A5], I felt I had to correct Jerry Johnson, a spokesman for the Genesee Intermediate School District. He said this had never happened before. A similar incident has happened in Flint schools before.

I also have called and reported speeding and improper lane changes by GISD buses. With all the people in Flint needing jobs, I'm sure there are some terrific drivers out there who could pass the test and give proof of a perfect driving record. Schools need to take a little time and check out the drivers a bit better. The parents of this community have enough on their plates right now without having to worry about careless bus drivers.

Patsy L. Craig
Flint

Internet safety tops priority list this month; Lt. Koenigsknecht urges parents to get involved

By Don Reid-Coldwater Daily Reporter Staff Writer

March 6, 2006

COLDWATER — Parents can use the Internet to make sure their children are safe on the internet, the commander of the Coldwater post of the Michigan State Police (MSP) is urging.

Lt. Al Koenigsknecht wants parents to take time during March, Parenting Awareness Month, to learn about Internet predators and practice Internet safety with their kids.

“It is a valuable resource and learning tool. The Internet also provides predators with almost unhindered access to children,” Lt. Koenigsknecht said. “The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) estimates 77 million American children, ages 10 to 17, use the Internet regularly. Keeping them safe is our responsibility as parents, educators and law enforcement officers.”

Sunday, March 05, 2006

Birth control plan will cut welfare costs Governor's program will try to prevent unplanned pregnancies

The Detroit News

Is it a good idea to spend Medicaid funds on birth control for women who could not otherwise afford it?

Gov. Jennifer Granholm's plan to spend \$183 million to prevent unwanted pregnancies among low-income women is a good investment in reducing Michigan's burgeoning welfare burden. The plan, approved last week by the federal government, would use federal dollars to teach birth control and provide contraceptives to women who can't afford them.

It's drawing fire from religious groups, who raise concerns about the state promoting sexual promiscuity and absolving women of responsible behavior.

But that horse is already out of the barn. Michigan pays for 52,000 Medicaid births each year. If that number could be cut by one-third, the savings would be roughly \$274 million.

That's just the start of the obligation for taxpayers. Most of the Medicaid babies are born to single mothers and will go immediately on the welfare rolls, where they'll often remain until adulthood and beyond.

The state has a stake in cutting these costs. Education and prevention offer the best opportunities for reducing the number of children born into poverty and thus the burden on taxpayers.

Michigan's Medicaid burden is already consuming nearly 20 percent of the state budget and is growing every year.

That growth must be slowed if Michigan hopes to improve its education system and rebuild its crumbling infrastructure. The governor's plan is one answer.

Michigan pregnancy costs

New family planning spending: \$183 million

Annual number of Medicaid births: 52,000

Savings from 33 percent reduction in Medicaid births: \$274 million

Source: State of Michigan

Monday, March 06, 2006

Betty DeRamus

Glimmer of hope: Medicaid waiver for family planning

I wish I understood why so many young unmarried women rush into motherhood. It's hardly a glamour job: Babies whine and puke, cereal and milk carry fat price tags, and it's tough to push a stroller onto a bus.

Casey Jo Caswell was just 16 when she had her son, Ricky. His father was a convicted drug trafficker, and Caswell had only a ninth-grade education.

If you've been keeping up with The News, you already know how Caswell's story turned out. Now 25 and married for a second time, she lost custody of four of her children to the state.

Tim and Lisa Holland, the couple who took in those children, now stand accused of murdering Caswell's first child, Ricky Holland.

Unprepared and unready

Caswell is an extreme example of what can happen when unprepared and unready parents have children. In 2001, 40.6 percent of all pregnancies in Michigan were unintended. And it would take a column 10 times this long to list all of the pitfalls many faced, including increased chances of poverty and shattered relationships.

No wonder state officials are celebrating the federal government's approval last week of a Medicaid waiver that extends family planning services to 200,000 Michigan women without health insurance.

If the program succeeds in reducing unintended pregnancies, it eventually should save the state dollars. Each birth of a baby to a woman without health insurance costs Medicaid \$11,000, but a year's worth of birth control supplies cost about \$200.

However, it would take a team of police officers, social workers, psychologists, teachers and prison administrators to calculate what such programs might save society in social wear and tear. "If all pregnancies were intended, the state would see significant reductions in infant mortality, child abuse, child neglect and abortion," Gov. Jennifer Granholm said in a statement.

Plan includes education

The best news, though, is that this Medicaid waiver plan won't just make birth control available to women slightly above the poverty line. The best news is that it includes education and prenatal and postnatal counseling.

This is a key point because simply making birth control more available isn't enough. People have to learn to make responsible choices and to believe in and plan for the future.

They have to show up for counseling sessions. They have to use restraint in their social relationships. And they have to understand the many ways in which having children changes parents' lives.

Of course, in the best of all possible worlds, programs like this wouldn't be necessary.

Everybody would abstain from sex until they're ready for children or else get their tubes tied.

That's not going to happen. The Easter Bunny isn't going to patrol schools, either, and stick-up men and murderers aren't going to march into precincts and surrender.

So, we work with what we have -- another program expansion, another whiff of hope.

You can reach Betty DeRamus at (313) 222-2296 or bderamus@detnews.com.

Scant Drop Seen in Abortion Rate if Parents Are Told

By ANDREW LEHREN and JOHN LELAND
The New York Times

Published: March 6, 2006

For all the passions they generate, laws that require minors to notify their parents or get permission to have an abortion do not appear to have produced the sharp drop in teenage abortion rates that some advocates hoped for, an analysis by The New York Times shows. The analysis, which looked at six states that introduced parental involvement laws in the last decade and is believed to be the first study to include data from years after 1999, found instead a scattering of divergent trends.

For instance, in Tennessee, the abortion rate went down when a federal court suspended a parental consent requirement, then rose when the law went back into effect. In Texas, the rate fell after a notification law went into effect, but not as fast as it did in the years before the law. In Virginia, the rate barely moved when the state introduced a notification law in 1998, but fell after the requirement was changed to parental consent in 2003.

Since the United States Supreme Court recognized states' rights to restrict abortion in 1992, parental involvement legislation has been a cornerstone in the effort to reduce abortions. Such laws have been a focus of divisive election campaigns, long court battles and grass-roots activism, and are now in place in 34 states. Most Americans say they favor them.

"It's one of the few areas that the U.S. Supreme Court has allowed states to legislate, so it's become a key for lowering the abortion rate," said Mary Spaulding Balch, director of state legislation for the National Right to Life Committee. Ms. Balch said she believed that consent laws were effective.

Yet the Times analysis of the states that enacted laws from 1995 to 2004 — most of which had low abortion rates to begin with — found no evidence that the laws had a significant impact on the number of minors who got pregnant, or, once pregnant, the number who had abortions. A separate analysis considered whether the existence or absence of a law could be used to predict whether abortions went up or down. It could not. The six states studied are in the South and West: Arizona, Idaho, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia. (A seventh state, Oklahoma, also passed a parental notification law in this period, but did not gather abortion data before 2000.)

Supporters of the laws say they promote better decision-making and reduce teenage abortions; opponents say they chip away at abortion rights and endanger young lives by exposing them to potentially violent reaction from some parents.

But some workers and doctors at abortion clinics said that the laws had little connection with the real lives of most teenagers, and that they more often saw parents pressing their daughters to have abortions than trying to stop them. And many teenagers say they never considered hiding their pregnancies or abortion plans from their mothers.

"I would have told my mother anyway," said a 16-year-old named Nicole, who waited recently at a clinic in Allentown, Pa., a state that requires minors to get the permission of just one parent.

Nicole's mother and father are divorced, and it was her mother she went to for permission to have an abortion.

"She was the first person I called," Nicole said. "She's like a best friend to me."

Abortion rates have been dropping nationwide since the mid-1980's, most precipitously for teenagers. But in three states — Arizona, Idaho and Tennessee — the percentage of pregnant minors who had abortions rose slightly after the consent laws went into effect.

When the Times study compared the first full year after a state began enforcing a parental law with the last full year before the law, it found that abortions among minors dropped an average of 9 percent. But in the same period, the rates for pregnant 18- and 19-year-olds, who were not affected by the law, dropped by 5 percent, suggesting that most of the drop among minors was associated with other factors that affected minors and adults alike.

"There are ongoing trends that are pushing both birth rates and abortion rates down significantly, and those larger trends are more important than the effect of these laws," said Ted Joyce, an economist at Baruch College in New York who has studied parental involvement laws. He found they had limited effects on small subgroups of minors but little impact over all.

Curing health care

State Medical Society providing critical leadership

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Monday, March 06, 2006

The state's health care delivery system has been ailing for years, but its prognosis may be improving now that the Michigan State Medical Society has stepped in to provide some much-needed leadership.

The society recently rolled out its plan, "The Future of Medicine: Leading the Way to a Better Health Care System." It's based on four basic principles - wellness, value, quality and universal coverage - but nothing about the plan is simple. Nor will it be easy to accomplish without a broad buy-in.

To that end, the group has put together a coalition of stakeholders that include the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, labor, the state surgeon general and other leaders.

The group wisely sought out the opinions of patients, doctors, other health care workers, employers, insurance companies and lawmakers in coming up with ways to improve the system. Suggestions ranged from controlling costs and streamlining insurance rules, to expanding the use of electronic records. Two-thirds of those who responded to a medical society survey pointed to the need for universal health care coverage, but patients weren't given a free pass. Personal responsibility was touted, as well as the need for insurers to cover regular checkups and wellness care.

The plan is ambitious and will take years to realize. It can be hoped that along the way the government will step in to do its part. In the meantime, success will depend largely on the medical society's willingness to stick with it through the inevitable patches of inertia that accompany any sweeping reform.

The problems facing health care in Michigan and in states across the country are large and legion. Costs have spiraled outrageously, the number of uninsured and underinsured patients remains unacceptably high, unhealthy lifestyles abound, uncompensated care strains budgets and a staggering 30 percent of the dollars spent on medical care is going to paperwork.

The 141-year-old medical society has the clout and expertise to get the ball rolling, and we are hopeful that the resulting momentum will lead to a vastly improved system.

Ann Arbor News Letters

March 5, 2006

U.S. health care system evidence of indifference

It is really sad to think that lawmakers do not support health care for all of those who cannot afford it, especially those who are older and those with chronic illness. Most lawmakers in Washington, I think, have an I-don't-give-a-crap attitude. They can afford health care. This is an example, if you think about it, of taking from the poor, those that cannot afford it, and letting the rich lawmakers and corporate muckety-mucks get away with everything. It is a slam in the face of the working Americans.

I do not support the president on anything he has to offer. He blatantly shows he does not care for the little person. Katrina funds are mismanaged and I am sure will be for some time. Why should I pay for George Bush's retirement and health care?

Gloria L. Klught, Ypsilanti

Mass. groups back ballot initiative on universal healthcare

By Michael Levenson, Boston Globe Correspondent | March 5, 2006

Backers of universal health insurance yesterday refused to throw their support behind a compromise to expand coverage that is emerging in the Legislature unless the plan becomes law, and vowed to continue pushing for a far costlier 2006 ballot initiative that would hike cigarette and payroll taxes to bring healthcare to all in Massachusetts.

Members of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, a coalition of 65 local religious institutions, and Health Care For All said they would press ahead with the ballot initiative until they were satisfied that the legislative compromise had been enacted and that it represented, in the words of one activist, "a true expansion of healthcare."

The tough talk raised the prospect of an expensive ballot fight that could pit liberal groups like the interfaith organization against business groups and perhaps tobacco companies. GBIO members have gathered 113,000 signatures for the ballot initiative and said yesterday they would continue mobilizing for an additional 20,000 to ensure the proposal makes the November ballot. "This really is about a substantial expansion of healthcare -- if that's what this is, the people will applaud," said Rabbi Jonah Pesner, a GBIO leader, reflecting on the healthcare compromise emerging in the Legislature. "If this doesn't reach that substantial expansion of access, the people will go to the ballot."

Pesner said the legislative plan, still in negotiations in the House and Senate, was too lacking in detail to determine whether it met what he called a "moral imperative" to provide health insurance for the approximately 500,000 people who go without coverage in Massachusetts.

GBIO leaders said they would try to decide by July whether to abandon their ballot plan.

John McDonough, a former state lawmaker and executive director of Health Care For All, an advocacy group, called the legislative compromise a "hugely significant breakthrough" but cautioned that there were too many stumbling blocks left -- in Washington and on Beacon Hill -- to guarantee the plan would become law.

Until then, he said, Health Care For All members would reserve judgment on the compromise because they had worked too hard on the ballot campaign and believe the citizen plan is helping to compel recalcitrant lawmakers to act on healthcare reform in the Legislature.

McDonough added that while Health Care For All considers a legislative bill preferable to a voter initiative, state lawmakers have only made public "the tip of the iceberg of their plan."

"So there is a large array of critically important details that are just unknown," McDonough said.

Another factor: Governor Mitt Romney, who has praised lawmakers for moving ahead with healthcare negotiations, has not said whether he will sign the bill into law. Yesterday, Julie Teer, a Romney spokeswoman, echoed McDonough, saying the plan on Beacon Hill is too lacking in detail to say whether it would be vetoed.

The plans from both sides differ in scope and cost. The legislative plan aims to make the state eligible for \$385 million in federal Medicaid money. Under the agreement between House Speaker Salvatore F. DiMasi and Senate President Robert E. Travaglini, the plan would assess companies with 10 or more employees that do not provide health coverage \$295 a year for each worker, say several negotiators, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. A senior legislative

aide has estimated the plan would eventually cover half to two-thirds of the state's uninsured. Lawmakers have refused to provide more details.

Under the initiative backed by activists, nearly everyone without health insurance in Massachusetts would receive coverage, backers say. The bill would pool money currently spent on healthcare and new funds from the federal government, and impose a 60-cent tax increase on cigarettes. In exchange, it would guarantee coverage for the poor through MassHealth or by helping with payments for health insurance purchased through employers. Employers would have to either provide health coverage or pay a fee to the state, the bill says.

That's what's really driving this," Pesner said, "the moral imperative and the popular imperative to insure the uninsured."

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Domestic Violence Court had 727 cases

Monday, March 06, 2006

By Steven Hepker
shepker@citpat.com -- 768-4923

He killed men and saw friends killed in Iraq, and he returned to Jackson angry enough to beat his wife in a scuffle over car keys.

"My rage burned until moments where my acts were justified to me; arguments, yelling, playful wrestling, were all reasons for me to explode with rage," he explained to District Judge R. Darryl Mazur.

The soldier was an offender among 727 domestic violence cases assigned to Mazur in 2005, the first year of Domestic Violence Court.

In his report, Mazur said 47 percent of those in the program went on probation, a third of cases were dismissed and 20 percent pleaded down to nonviolent misdemeanors.

Six probationers have graduated from the program. The requirements include completing either a 30- or 52-week batterer intervention program, refraining from committing any more violations of the court, and paying all fines and other costs. The incentive: no jail time -- and for first offenders, no permanent record.

At least 33 participants were discharged for a repeat offense or for otherwise violating probation. Most of the washouts went to jail.

While that sounds like the specialty court is failing to have a positive impact on abusers, Mazur points out that most participants are placed on probation 15 months, and they are just starting to graduate. Recent graduates were on shorter probations.

"We expect to graduate five or six people per month this year," Mazur said. When the program gets rolling completely, Mazur expects about 300 participants to be in the program at any one time.

Defendants must enroll in Catholic Charities' batterer-intervention program. The agency offers 30- and 52-week programs for men and women. Twenty percent of batterers are women.

Mazur and three probation officers work closely with participants, who are encouraged to learn about the roots of their anger and to practice alternatives to arguing and violence.

Letters from some offenders indicate aggression intervention is a wake-up call.

"Replacing the blaming with responsibility and accountability was probably my biggest area for improvement," wrote one offender who titled his testament, "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly."

One of the biggest hurdles to combating domestic violence remains: Many victims do not want to prosecute.

"They will make a complaint, and have a visible injury, and then they will say they just wanted him out of the house, that they didn't think he would go to jail," Mazur said. "I tell them that unless they stop the violence, it will get worse."

Mazur said another impediment for batterers is that there is no outside funding to help in aggression therapy. Participants must pay \$75 up front and \$25 a week for group sessions.

Domestic Violence Court is patterned after Recovery Court operated by Circuit Judge Charles Nelson. Each offers offenders a chance to change negative behaviors under court supervision, but with jail looming for those who fail.

"I think we consider it a successful first year," Mazur said.

Charge against chief assistant prosecutor dropped

STACY LANGLEY, The Huron Daily Tribune

03/06/2006

BAY CITY — During a Friday afternoon hearing in Bay County District Court, a Bay County assistant prosecutor asked the judge to dismiss the domestic violence charge against Huron County Chief Assistant Prosecutor Stephen J. Allen after the case failed to move forward. Bad Axe Attorney David B. Herrington, representing Allen, said he requested a hearing before Bay County District Court Judge Craig Alston after Bay County Assistant Prosecutor Margaret Leaming filed yet another motion to adjourn the jury trial until sometime in May.

“There was a lack of due diligence on behalf of the (Bay County) prosecutor’s office,”

Herrington said. “In order to request an adjournment they had to show good cause as to why they wanted to adjourn the case. They wanted to add another witness, and they hadn’t even served the victim in the case with notice — she was never informed of a trial date. And the judge said he didn’t see where this case was moving forward.”

The trial was scheduled to get under way for the first time on Jan. 13, when it was adjourned the day before. At that time Leaming notified the court a witness would not be available for the trial. The case then was set for trial a second time to be heard on Tuesday when Leaming filed another request for an adjournment.

Herrington said it was Leaming’s motion during Friday’s hearing in Bay City to dismiss the case and, “the judge granted it. This case has been pending for months now — more than seven months.”

Herrington said the dismissal is “good news.” He said all along “we don’t believe that a crime was committed — domestic violence did not occur here.”

Allen was arrested at his Port Hope area home after returning home from work on July 20. Allen and his wife, Jami Allen, reportedly had an argument and were quarreling about their dogs when Allen allegedly pushed his wife. She called 9-1-1 requesting a police officer respond to the Port Hope area home. He was arrested by Huron County Sheriff’s deputies.

Police reports from the investigation had been turned over to the Michigan Attorney General’s Office who assigned Bay County Prosecutor Joe Sheeran’s office to the case.

The Tribune was unable to reach Leaming for comment.

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Published March 5, 2006

From the Lansing State Journal

Charles Corley: Highfields only wants to keep helping teens

Highfields' Youth Opportunity Camp in Onondaga has been the subject of considerable public attention. That attention is in sharp contrast to the work Highfields has done for more than 40 years, helping young people in our community to become responsible adults.

As was reported, based on recent incidents, Ingham County and the state removed the young men under their care from our residential program. In order to concentrate on the ongoing investigations and our own review, Highfields voluntarily and temporarily suspended our residential program and arranged for those remaining in our care to be temporarily transferred to other facilities.

The safety and well-being of the young men in our residential program always will be Highfields' first priority. We encourage and are fully cooperating with the outside investigations into those incidents, and pledge to verify exactly what happened, determine the causes, and make any changes necessary to resolve

Be assured we will not ask anyone to return to our program until we are fully satisfied it is the best and safest program it can be.

We were founded in 1962 with the express purpose of adopting and promoting programs to treat, educate and rehabilitate young people in our community. Over the years, our residential program has helped hundreds, if not thousands, of young men to become responsible members of our community. It is our goal to continue providing these important public services in the safest and most effective manner possible.

Simply put, the young men we help deserve nothing less and we cannot, and will not, accept anything less from ourselves.

Because of our past successes, many in the community only know us as Camp Highfields. While we are honored to be known for our residential services, we also provide critical services on an annual basis to more than 8,000 children and parents in our other 14 non-residential based programs.

We provide these services because earlier assistance and counseling with children and their families dramatically reduce the number of young men who will later need a residential treatment program like Highfields. As a result, over the last 20 years, Highfields has developed more than a dozen innovative programs that now operate in schools, communities and in the homes of families that need help. We continue to

provide these important services and programs on a day-to-day basis throughout mid-Michigan.

We are proud of the fact that Highfields regularly earns high marks from the Council on Accreditation of Services for Families and Children. But we are especially proud of the successful youth and families whom we have had the honor and privilege of serving in our community and around mid-Michigan.

Highfields looks forward to continuing to provide the highest standards of performance in all of our programs. In the meantime, we will continue to work with the state and Ingham County to do everything in our power to address and remedy the recently raised concerns.

EDITOR'S NOTE: LSJ Editorial Page Editor Mark Nixon is a member of Highfields' board. To avoid a conflict of interest, Nixon has recused himself from board meetings.

Lansing State Journal

Letters

March 5, 2006

Highfields works

I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to work at Camp Highfields in the early 1990s. They used reality therapy, control theory, a team approach and a multi-level system with the troubled teens.

I'm concerned that the knee-jerk reaction of late will close this much-needed facility for good.

One 19-year-old in a recent TV interview recalled being restrained, but also recalled he was acting out. Since this young man is not now in prison, we can call his stay a success story.

All employees were trained in the use of nonviolent crisis intervention techniques and the verbal escalation/de-escalation continuum. Restraint of youth was used only when the youth was in danger of hurting himself and/or others, as required by law.

When a youth ran away, he called Highfields to talk with his counselor. I hope Judge Richard Garcia and other judges were told these facts as well.

Scott Askegard
Mason

Highfields praised

This past school year, I had the pleasure of serving as a substitute teacher in Lansing schools. I saw that, despite their many positive aspects, our public schools inevitably have many children who experience significant struggles in the classroom, at home and in the community. During the last 40 years, more than a few of these children have ended up in a Highfields Inc. program.

I have visited the Highfields campus many times, including as a student, and even participated in some of their programs. I have never seen a student who was treated with anything but professionalism.

Nor have I ever been treated with anything less than the utmost grace and civility by their staff.

Highfields has a long-standing and positive reputation for dealing with this community's troubled youth. I would hate to see us lose track of that now, when we need their assistance more than ever.

Nicholas J. Pincumbe
Tuscaloosa, Ala.

Posted: 3-6-2006

Ludington Daily News

Hansen seeks to allow other uses for prison

Baldwin facility could have wider range of correctional populations under proposal

The Michigan Youth Correctional Facility could become a private facility capable of housing a wider range of correctional populations under legislation introduced state Rep. Goeff Hansen, R-Hart.

Hansen's measure, House Bill 5800, gives a private vendor the latitude to use the Michigan Youth Correctional Facility for any in-state or out-of-state correctional population, such as county inmates, Homeland Security detainees or out-state correctional inmates.

"The governor's budget cut that closed the youth facility last year has severely impacted the Baldwin area jobs market and economy," said Hansen. "This bill gives GEO the authority to explore alternative uses and tenants for the facility, which is what the Michigan Department of Corrections has indicated it encourages and supports. Before that can happen, the law stipulating it as a youth-only facility needs to change though."

Leo Lalonde, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Corrections, said the DOC was willing to consider the proposal.

"We've always supported the concept of finding alternate populations for the Baldwin facility, and if that means looking at statutory changes, we'll willing to look at that," said Lalonde.

The facility closed in October after Governor Jeniffer Granholm vetoed funding the GEO contract.

GEO, the private company which owns the facility, was Lake County's largest employer.

Under Hansen's bill:

- The private vendor may directly contract with any local, state or federal agency;
- The private vendor may enter into an agreement between any local, state or federal agency, including the county sheriff or city, village, township or county where the facility is located. For example, the State of Virginia could contract with the Lake County Sheriff's Office or Webber Township to house inmates; GEO could then be contracted to provide services.
- Operation and employment/training requirements of the facility shall comply with the American Correctional Association standards;
- Serious incidents would be reported to MDOC and local law enforcement agencies;
- MDOC could inspect and review facility operations; and,
- Employees of the private vendor have authority to exercise use of force in the same manner as MDOC employees.

“Right now, the rug has been pulled out from under GEO and the community with very limited options available to move forward,” Hansen said. “Following the state’s ending of the juvenile correctional services contract, it’s in everyone’s interest to allow for a wider list of opportunities that can get the facility back in use.”

HB 5800 is now before the House Judiciary Committee for consideration.

Lansing State Journal Letters

March 6, 2006

Judge is wrong

The Feb. 22 LSJ article regarding Judge Richard Garcia's comments toward Jim Hines and the management team of Highfields Inc. was unprofessional and quite shocking.

For a person in the judge's position to infer incompetence, not only against one person, but a whole team of professionals without giving a reason, is grossly unfair.

I was hired by Hines in 1986 and have been working for him since. In no way could I ever describe him as incompetent or ineffective. To the contrary, he has always led by example to attain the high standards that the people of Ingham County and the state of Michigan have come to expect from our organization.

I can't explain the judge's inappropriate comments. I thought Ingham County and Highfields were supposed to be a team. Garcia is not talking like a team player.

Doug Heckenkamp
Onondaga

Highfields defended

In regard to a Feb. 22 LSJ article:

I am very familiar with Highfields Inc. and all the positive work it does. I have attended many events on the Highfields campus. Each and every event has involved the young men living on the Highfields campus. I have met young men who are willing to share their positive experiences and how the people who run this organization have changed their lives.

I believe the quote in the LSJ story from Judge Richard Garcia is unfair when referring to Highfields President Jim Hines.

Has the LSJ investigated all the positive work of Highfields and its management?

I hope the people of Ingham County understand Highfields is a truly wonderful organization that is taking a political hit by one of our elected officials.

Carol Roy
Lansing

Nursing home employees plead not guilty

Saturday, March 04, 2006

By Pat Shellenbarger
The Grand Rapids Press

BIG RAPIDS -- One by one, six former employees of the Metron of Big Rapids nursing home walked to the front of the courtroom Friday and pleaded not guilty in the death of a resident. Outside the courtroom, friends of the deceased and friends of the accused offered conflicting views of what is a proper response to Sarah Comer's death.

"Sarah was my friend, and someone let her down," said Kathy Knapp, Comer's patient advocate and long-time friend. "I think there should be laws enacted that go higher up through the nursing home's administration to let them know somebody's watching. I want some kind of law put into effect to be sure this doesn't happen again."

Across the lobby, Judy Bull, whose mother, Grace Fuller, is a resident of Metron of Big Rapids, defended the home, particularly former administrator Robert Koch Jr. and nurse Kathleen Johnson.

"These are good people," she said. "I have seen Kathy many, many times in traumatic situations. I have seen her soft and sweet when a patient is crying and needs a hug. I have nothing but admiration for Kathy. She is the kindest person I have ever met. I can't believe these people are guilty of this."

Comer, 50, died Jan. 16, 2005, 16 hours after she was transferred to the home from Spectrum Health Butterworth Campus, where she was treated for kidney failure and respiratory failure. She was supposed to receive oxygen continuously, but the nursing home employees allowed her oxygen tank to run empty, Michigan Attorney General Michael Cox said in announcing the charges Monday.

Some of the eight suspects are accused of causing Comer's death through negligence. Others are charged with covering up the cause of her death. They include the home's former administrator, the former medical director, five nurses and a nurse aide.

All but one of the six present Friday were represented by attorneys, and all were released on personal recognizance bonds.

When Mecosta County District Court Magistrate Gary Lough called her name, nurse aide Tracy Moore, the lowest ranking of the home's former employees, walked alone to the lectern. Lough asked if she had an attorney.

"I just learned of this three days ago," Moore said. "He had prior arrangements."

Lough was surprised, particularly because Moore is facing three felony charges, including involuntary manslaughter, carrying a penalty of up to 15 years in prison.

"When you have an attorney, they usually appear," he told her, "especially with something this complex."

One defendant, nurse Christine Mondrella, facing a single misdemeanor charge for failing to report the abuse of a patient, waived her arraignment. Another nurse, Cheryl Williams, was arrested Thursday in Florida, where she now lives, and is not expected to fight extradition to Michigan, a spokesman for Cox said.

The Big Rapids home's parent company, Cascade Township-based Metron Integrated Health Systems, operates nine nursing homes in West Michigan and provides home health care, medical equipment and hospice care.

The company's founder, Marvin Piersma, and president, Mark Piersma, have declined to comment on the case.

Posted: 3-6-2006

Six former nursing home workers enter pleas in resident's death

BIG RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — Six of eight former nursing home employees charged in the death of a 50-year-old resident pleaded not guilty Friday. Rudy Casimer Ochs, 49, of Hart, pleaded not guilty to charges of accessory after the fact to a felony and willful neglect of duty as a public officer stemming from the death of Sarah Comer.

Comer of Big Rapids died Jan. 16, 2005, at Metron Nursing Facility a day after being transferred there from Spectrum Health Butterworth Campus in Grand Rapids.

She had been weaned from a ventilator to oxygen just 48 hours before the transfer.

Ochs maintains his innocence.

"Dr. Ochs did not participate in a 'cover up' of any facts relating to Sarah Comer's death, nor was the medical mistake attributable to Dr. Ochs," a release from Ochs' attorney, Gary Springstead, stated.

Ochs, currently Oceana County's medical examiner, is a medical doctor who was the medical director of Metron of Big Rapids and Mecosta County's deputy medical director.

Cox said Ochs did not disclose to investigators that the oxygen tank ran out of oxygen, nor did he order an autopsy.

Also charged in the incident are:

—Tracey Marie Moore, 31, of Luther, who was a direct caregiver and is charged with involuntary manslaughter, among other charges.

—Kathleen Rose Johnson, 57, a day shift supervisor from Big Rapids charged with involuntary manslaughter and tampering with evidence, among other counts.

—Cheryl Lynn Williams, 41, the midnight shift charge nurse supervisor, who also is charged with involuntary manslaughter and other counts. She's currently living in Palmetto, Fla.

—Christine Marie Mondrella, 42, of Paris, who was on maternity leave when Comer died but was called back to work after the death. She's charged with failure to report abuse of a patient.

—Sharon Elaine Mumah, 39, of Morley, who was the corporate nurse consultant for Metron and interim director of nursing. Among other charges, she's accused of failing to report patient abuse.

—Laura Lynn Ferrara, 41, of Kalamazoo, who was the corporate clinical director for Metron based in Grand Rapids and is accused of helping withhold information from state health officials.

—Robert Earl Koch Jr., 49, who was the nursing home administrator. Now living

in Columbia, S.C., Koch intentionally concealed that the tank ran out of oxygen and failed to inform the state about the circumstances of Comer's death or that Johnson had died on the same day, according to Cox.

Mondrella waived her arraignment. Williams was arrested Thursday in Florida and is not expected to fight extradition to Michigan, a Cox spokesman said.

Michigan Attorney General Mike Cox last week filed 18 felony counts against five registered nurses, the nursing home's medical director, the former administrator and a certified nursing assistant.

Some of the eight suspects are accused of causing Comer's death through negligence. Others are charged with covering up the cause of her death.

All but one of the six in Mecosta County District Court on Friday were represented by attorneys, and all were released on personal recognizance bonds.

Metron also runs nursing homes in Allegan, Belding, Bloomingdale, Cedar Springs, Forest Hills, Greenville, Kalamazoo and Lamont. Metron of Big Rapids said it has cooperated fully with the attorney general's office in the investigation and will continue to do so.

Mar 4, 8:42 AM EST

Woman found guilty in slaying of elderly family friend

MOUNT CLEMENS, Mich. (AP) -- A Macomb County woman will spend the rest of her life behind bars after a jury convicted her of first-degree murder in the 2004 death of an elderly woman.

Nicole Ann Dupure, 19, of Eastpointe, was found guilty by a Macomb County Circuit Court jury on Friday in the slaying of family friend Shirley Perry, 89, of St. Clair Shores.

Dupure faces an automatic life prison term without chance for parole when she is sentenced April 6 by Judge Diane M. Druzinski.

Her boyfriend, William T. Blevins III, 21, pleaded guilty in September to second-degree murder and received a 20- to 50-year prison term. He agreed to testify against Dupure in a plea deal.

"My client who supposedly aids him or facilitates it gets life, but the guy who actually did it gets 20 years because of a plea?" asked defense attorney David Burgess after the verdict. He said he is certain Dupure will appeal.

Macomb County Assistant Prosecutor Robert Merrelli said Dupure held Perry's nose while she was being strangled.

"She's the one who strikes the victim on the head. She's the one who gets the idea to get a knife from the kitchen and says 'stab her,'" Merrelli told The Macomb Daily of Mount Clemens for a story published Saturday.

On the witness stand, Dupure denied going into Perry's apartment with Blevins.

Catholic youths go hungry to help others

Saturday, March 4, 2006

By Julie Mack

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Lauren Scudder's school lunch on Friday consisted of rice and water.

That was also the meal selected by four of the other nine freshmen girls sitting at Lauren's table in the Hackett Catholic Central High School cafeteria.

The girls were among the hundreds of participants on Friday in a special program -- coinciding with the beginning of the Lenten season -- at Hackett and Kalamazoo's two K-8 Catholic schools, St. Augustine and St. Monica.

Students were given the option of choosing a lunch of rice and water and donating their lunch money to Loaves and Fishes, a Kalamazoo food bank. About three-quarters of students at the three schools participated in the program, which raised about \$1,200, said Barb Burpo, food-services director for Catholic Schools of Greater Kalamazoo.

"I think it's worth it," said Lauren about giving up a regular lunch. "It's just one day."

Burpo said she and her staff got the idea for the program several years ago, but they have struggled with how to implement it within the guidelines of the federal school-lunch program.

The original concept was to have all students participate, but the federal lunch program requires schools to make a balanced lunch available to low-income students. Burpo decided to make the program voluntary, which complies with federal rules.

She said participation was particularly high at the two K-8 schools, where Friday's lunch period included a talk on world hunger.

There was not a formal presentation at Hackett, but Lauren and her friends were talking about world hunger anyway and how Friday's lunch dovetails with the school's emphasis on social justice. "Everywhere you go, they talk about it," Lauren said.

Across the table, Johanna Hamilton agreed. Since transferring from a public school to Hackett this fall, she said she's been thinking much more about world poverty and hunger.

"They've made me much more aware of it," she said. "I've become a better person by coming here."

03/03/2006

Judge denies parents visitation of injured baby

Stacy Langley , The Huron Daily Tribune

BAD AXE — On Thursday the mother and father of the Bad Axe baby at the center of a child abuse investigation appeared with their attorneys before Judge David L. Clabuesch in Huron County Probate Court.

Attorney Dawn Schumacher represented the mother of the baby boy, Stardust Welshans, 23, of Bad Axe. E. Duane Cubitt represented the baby's father, Ryan Welshans, also 23, of Bad Axe. Clabuesch explained for the court record that Thursday's hearing was scheduled on an emergency basis. It was requested by the Department of Human Services (DHS) after the now 7-week-old boy had been seriously injured while in the care of his father, Ryan Welshans, at his apartment sometime during the weekend of Feb. 5.

"What we know is things happened, extremely disturbing things," Clabuesch said. "And as a result of that we are having this hearing today. Both boys (a 1-year-old and the 7-week-old) have been placed in foster care."

Huron County Assistant Prosecutor Elizabeth V. Weisenbach, working on behalf of DHS, called Caseworker Monica Siegfried to the witness stand to explain why she requested the hearing. She also questioned her about her stance on parental visitation and what the placement of the children should be, in her opinion.

Siegfried began dealing with the Welshans family in February of 2005, shortly after the birth of the couple's first child. That child was taken out of the couple's care and placed by DHS into a foster home while both parents were ordered by the court to work on parenting issues. In December of 2005 court records indicate the married couple separated from each other with Ryan Welshans living in the couple's home and Stardust Welshans moving in with her biological parents in the city of Bad Axe. During the couple's separation they both had visitation rights to the 1-year-old child.

Siegfried told the court when she became aware a second child was born (he was born on Jan. 9) a hearing was called to determine placement of the newborn. At that time it was determined Ryan Welshans had made progress in the efforts set forth for him by the court and DHS, and the newborn would go home to live with him.

Siegfried told the court about how she was notified on Feb. 6 by Det./Sgt. Ron Roberts of the Huron County Sheriff's Office, about the baby's severe injuries and hospitalization on Feb. 5 at Hurley Medical Center in Flint.

"Through the investigation, he (the newborn) was at home with Ryan (Welshans) when his injuries were sustained," Siegfried said. "Star was living with her parents in Bad Axe."

Siegfried told the court she spoke with Dr. Brian Nolan, the baby's doctor at Hurley, while the child was in Nolan's care.

"Dr. Nolan said he felt (the injuries) were non-accidental," Siegfried said.

"Ryan was the only one there. I found out that he allowed Star into the home. She was not supposed to be in the home with the kids present (according to the court order)."

During previous court hearings in probate court regarding the two young children, Stardust Welshans was only allowed supervised visitation with her two young children while she was

working on a mental health treatment plan along with other parenting issues.

“The department had been working to get Star housing, treatment with a therapist, and she was not cooperating with her psychiatrist,” Siegfried said, explaining the efforts by DHS to help Stardust get a home of her own. “We were also helping her with her Social Security benefits.” Before Weisenbach was finished questioning Siegfried she told the court her recommendation was to have both children remain court wards, pending filing of paperwork to terminate the couple’s parental rights to both of the children.

“Both Star and Ryan are suspects in the abuse of (Baby Welshans),” Siegfried said. “Visitation hasn’t ever went well for Star, and this will continue to be a problem. Ryan did fine with his visits, but he is a suspect in the case — he failed to protect the child when he allowed her (Stardust Welshans) access to the child.”

No charges have been filed against either parent. The Huron County Sheriff’s Office and Huron County Prosecutor’s Office continue to investigate this matter.

Schumacher questioned Siegfried about how she was aware of Stardust Welshans being in Ryan’s home the weekend the baby was allegedly injured. Siegfried told the court the information came from both parents and neighbors of Ryan Welshans.

Siegfried said Stardust Welshans gave her several accounts of what could have happened to the newborn to cause his injuries, explained to the court by Siegfried as a “depressed fractured skull, rib fractures, clavicle fractures and other injuries.”

“At one point she (Stardust Welshans) said she did something. Then she had a different story,” Siegfried said.

Schumacher questioned Siegfried about a doctor’s visit the newborn had on Feb. 1 with Dr. Tracy McComb, just days before he was rushed by ambulance from Ryan Welshans’ home to the emergency room for medical treatment of severe head injuries.

“I spoke with her about the follow-up visit she had with (Baby Welshans) on Feb. 1. She had the information faxed to me — how much he weighed, and she noticed something wrong with (the baby’s) clavicle — a possible fracture — and sent Ryan Welshans to get an X-ray (for the baby).” Siegfried said Ryan Welshans did not follow through with Dr. McComb’s order for an X-ray.

Siegfried told the court that on Feb. 16 all visitation to both children by their parents was stopped. She said in her opinion Stardust Welshans has shown a “lack of substantial progress” since DHS and the court has stepped in with a permanency plan.

Attorney Andrew Lockard also attended the hearing Thursday as Guardian Ad Litem (on behalf of both children involved). Lockard questioned Siegfried about the alleged abuse of the newborn and exactly what the stories were that Stardust Welshans told her.

“One story was that she had dropped him getting up from a chair,” Siegfried said. She said Stardust Welshans also told her that the baby’s injury was sustained during child birth when the umbilical cord became wrapped around the baby’s neck.

When it was Cubitt’s turn for questions, he was concerned about his client’s visitation with the baby.

“When (Baby Welshans) was removed to go to the hospital, was that the last time there was visitation?” Cubitt asked.

“We stopped visitation pending the filing of termination of parental rights,” Siegfried replied. Cubitt emphasized the fact DHS felt Ryan Welshans was doing well and suggested the newborn be placed in his care after the baby was born. And he said Ryan Welshans should continue to be allowed visitation since there haven’t been any formal criminal charges filed in

the case.

"He allowed Star into the home against a court order," Siegfried said.

Cubitt questioned Siegfried about the availability or lack of outside help through DHS or other services for Ryan Welshans during the week and on weekends.

"There were workers available through the week to assist him 24 hours a day," she said.

"Ryan's mother was being paid to be a mentor to Ryan throughout the week and the weekends. Mom was there as often as needed. She and Ryan had contact often."

When the attorneys were through with their questions, it was Clabuesch's turn. "Ryan was not to allow the mother access to the children, that's Thursday (Jan. 26), by Sunday (Feb. 5) we have this injury.

"Stardust is back with Ryan. She moved back in two days after the baby was hospitalized."

Siegfried responded saying she feels it is not appropriate for either of the parents to have visitation with the children.

"They are both suspects in a criminal investigation. An act on their part has caused the injury to (Baby Welshans)," she said. "I am convinced this was not accidental."

Schumacher responded to Siegfried's comments saying, "Until the investigation is complete, you (Siegfried) really don't know how the injuries occurred to (Baby Welshans)."

Siegfried disagreed, relying on the information she had received from the detectives investigating the case and the doctors who cared for the baby.

Both Schumacher and Cubitt asked for visitation for their clients. Schumacher added that she felt DHS should continue efforts to try to find Stardust Welshans housing and provide her transportation to and from her therapy appointments.

"There are no charges. She (Siegfried) said she can protect the children if there's visitation. I ask for visitation for Ryan Welshans," Cubitt said.

"Clearly they will remain wards of the court," Clabuesch said. "It's abundantly clear that reasonable efforts were made to keep this family together. We've implemented serious safety nets which included limited contact by the mother (Stardust Welshans) while getting her mental health taken care of. Ryan was given custody ... if the order was followed, then Stardust wouldn't have had access to the child that was injured on Ryan's watch. Whether you did it or you failed to protect, ultimately you're responsible for this child."

Clabuesch gave the Department of Human Services 14 days to file the termination of parental rights paperwork with the court. Until that time, there will be no visitation by either parent.

Clabuesch said if the termination papers are not filed during that time, he will allow the parents supervised visitation with both of the children.

"The problem I have with this is the couple moves apart. Ryan gets custody of the infant.

Stardust comes into the home and something horrific happens and the baby goes to the hospital and Star moves back into the home. There's a concern for their priorities here and an issue of protection," Clabuesch said.

The newborn baby currently is in foster care in Huron County. Siegfried said he is recovering from his injuries and will be seeing a neurologist and an eye specialist due to the injuries he sustained.

The 1-year-old boy continues to live with foster parents in Huron County. The children are in separate homes.

Police: Homeless Man Beaten, Set On Fire

POSTED: 6:07 pm EST March 5, 2006

BOSTON -- A homeless man is being treated at a Boston hospital after being attacked while sleeping in a park early Sunday.

Police said two men kicked the 30-year-old man in the stomach and then set him on fire.

No arrests have been made and police have given no indication of what might have provoked the attack.

The homeless man told police he was awakened by the men kicking him, then drifted back to sleep after the assault. He said the men returned, drenched him with a flammable liquid and set his legs on fire.

The park is a short walk from a cluster of downtown bars.

Last August, a 40-year-old homeless man died in Boston after he was beaten. Two teenagers have been charged with manslaughter.

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Published March 6, 2006
[From the Lansing State Journal]

Michigan's income tax still hits poor State among few without credits for low earnings

By Kathy Barks Hoffman
Associated Press

In Michigan, a family of three making as little as \$12,000 a year still is on the hook for nearly \$200 in state income taxes.

Sharon Parks of the Michigan League for Human Services, a Lansing-based advocacy group, says that's wrong. She'd like to see Michigan follow the lead of many other states and put a state earned income tax credit in place that would significantly decrease the taxes the working poor are asked to pay.

But two bills in the Senate - one sponsored by a Democrat, the other by a Republican - haven't gone anywhere.

So Michigan's poor continue to ante up. Like all other Michigan taxpayers, they face a 3.9 percent income tax rate on the money they earn.

Hope Burchard, a married 30-year-old mother of four from Lansing, said a state earned income tax credit would stretch the \$13,000 to \$15,000 a year she makes as a night-shift manager at an Arby's restaurant in Mason. Her husband currently is unable to work.

"I really think it would be beneficial and helpful to lower-income (workers), especially single parents," she said. "It would go for necessities - for possibly car repairs if need be or clothes."

Michigan among the few

A national report released Feb. 22 by the Washington-based Center on Budget and Policy Priorities shows that Michigan is one of just five states that tax families of four with annual incomes below \$14,000.

It's also one of just seven states that tax the incomes of three- or four-person families earning less than three quarters of the poverty line, or \$11,683 for a family of three and \$14,971 for a family of four.

Joining Michigan are Alabama, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, Montana and West Virginia.

"Michigan's threshold had been consistently under the poverty line," report co-author Jason Levitis said in a conference call. "The threshold in Michigan is slipping compared to the poverty line." Federal relief available

Poor working families can take advantage of a federal earned income tax credit, which will substantially reduce - or even eliminate - the amount of federal income tax they must pay. But unlike Burchard, who makes sure she gets the credit, too many Michigan residents lose out.

In 2003, more than a third of eligible state taxpayers didn't file to collect the federal tax credit. That left \$214 million in potential credits unclaimed.

"One of the biggest obstacles I see among those in poverty ... is they don't even pursue the earned income tax credit at all," said Susan Cancro, executive director of Lansing-based Advent House Ministries, which has several programs to help the poor. "They fear dealing with anything governmental, and they think they're going to lose rather than gain."

Both Democratic and Republican lawmakers hope Michigan taxpayers will get over their reluctance to sign up for the federal credit and are making efforts to draw attention to it.

House Republicans today plan to announce a statewide campaign of town hall meetings, announcements and community events to help people learn how to file for the credit. House Democrats have scheduled their own series of town hall meetings to provide help.

But while the federal credit can save low-income workers from hundreds to thousands of dollars on their federal tax forms, it does nothing to help them save on their state taxes.

Minimum Boost

No need for a vote on wage hike if legislators do the obviously right thing

March 5, 2006

State lawmakers ought to get ahead of the minimum wage juggernaut in the Nov. 7 election by raising the pay rate themselves.

It's well past time to give the lowliest paid workers a pay hike, so sooner would be better than later. Perhaps just as important, pre-emptive legislative action might help put an end to abuse of the ballot for political purposes.

If petition drives here and elsewhere in the nation succeed, Michigan will be one of at least five states with minimum-wage initiatives on the November ballot. The motivation is not just to offer a decent paycheck to everyone willing to work, important as that goal is, but also to boost turnout -- in this case, especially among those likely to vote Democratic. In Michigan, key partisan races include those for governor, U.S. senator and possibly even control of both chambers of the Legislature.

Michigan has generally not had a minimum wage rule separate from the federal one. At \$5.15 an hour, the federal standard is, in inflation-adjusted terms, about as low as it ever has been.

That's cruel to young people starting out, and it's an outright disservice to people trying to get off welfare; they are told to work but may have to resort to entry-level jobs that can never support them and their children if the base rate remains so low. Since Congress won't act, and there's no sign it will anytime soon, Michigan should.

A higher minimum wage does not seem to affect the overall economy, based on what has happened in other states. So many other big factors are at play -- here it is the decline of manufacturing -- that a hike in wages at the bottom of the scale has little impact one way or the other. In some instances, a minimum wage hike may actually boost economic activity by giving low-paid workers more money to spend.

If the 2004 elections are a guide, voters here would easily approve the wage hike. Since the outcome isn't really in doubt, even Republican lawmakers have ample room to bite the bullet in the name of better public policy.

Michigan's ballots have become unconscionably cluttered as interest groups master the task of pressing their causes, often using paid petition circulators. More and more, they also press for constitutional change, which can't be undone without another vote of the people.

That's shabby treatment for a document designed to maintain broad principles and the governing structure under which a state operates. In the case of the minimum wage amendment, 805 words would be added to an existing section of the Constitution that now has only one sentence: "The legislature may enact laws relative to the hours and conditions of employment."

That's clear direction for lawmakers to take their job seriously in this debate, and immediately boost the incomes of Michigan's poorest paid workers.

County continues workforce development pact

March 6, 2006

By Roland Stoy-Coldwater Daily Reporter staff writer

COLDWATER — Michigan Works placed 809 people from Branch County in jobs last year with \$1,160, 262 in workforce development funds, director Elaine Furu-Baker told county commissioners last week.

“This county is great to work with,” she said.

In addition, she said there are many jobs to be had in the state.

This Week in Washington

For the week ending 3/3/2006, Vol. XXVII, No. 5

- Hearing Covers Status of Part D Implementation
 - House Health Panel Holds Hearing on MedPAC Payment Policies
 - Simplified Prescription Drug Plan Bill Introduced in Senate
 - Senate Clears Way for Action on LIHEAP Measure
 - ACF Announces State Median Income Estimates for LIHEAP
-

Hearing Covers Status of Part D Implementation

On March 1, the House Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee held a hearing on the Medicare Part D prescription drug benefit. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Administrator Mark B. McClellan testified on the status of the benefit's implementation, as well as ongoing efforts within CMS to track and rectify complaints with Part D. McClellan said CMS is urging beneficiaries to change prescription drug plans no later than the 15th of the month for the new plan data to be reflected by the first day of the following month. He added that prescription drug plans (PDPs) and pharmacies are collaborating to develop standardized forms and procedures and that CMS would be reporting on prior authorization and formulary problems in the coming weeks. CMS will also be releasing a comprehensive report on the prices paid for pharmaceuticals under Part D and will issue a report on oversight within a few months. McClellan also said CMS requires PDPs to submit the number of types of appeals and exceptions granted on a quarterly basis.

Subcommittee Democrats expressed numerous concerns about Part D, including the possibility of extending the May 15, 2006, enrollment deadline; the ongoing inability of many dual-eligibles to access necessary medication; loss of revenue for pharmacies that are filling prescriptions regardless of their ability to confirm eligibility for the benefit and enrollment in a particular PDP; the inability of Medicare to negotiate pharmaceutical discounts for the new benefit; consistent and specific procedures for exceptions and appeals to PDP formularies; and CMS's decision to cease reimbursing state Medicaid agencies after March 8, among others. Some Democrats also said they would soon introduce legislation to repeal or reform the Medicare Modernization Act. They also recommended a follow-up hearing with McClellan in May to revisit the enrollment deadline. Republican subcommittee members highlighted the expected yearly savings under Part D through lower premiums and copays. Members of both parties praised pharmacists for the additional time spent to answer beneficiary questions and fill prescriptions.

Others who testified included Medicare Part D beneficiaries and representatives of PDPs; Wellpoint; pharmacists; and health advocates. A transcript of the hearing and additional information is available at <http://energycommerce.house.gov/108/Hearings/03012006hearing1787/hearing.htm>.

House Health Panel Holds Hearing on MedPAC Payment Policies

On March 1, the House Ways and Means Health Subcommittee, chaired by Rep. Nancy Johnson (R-Conn.), held a hearing to discuss recommendations made by the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission (MedPAC) regarding Medicare payment policies. The recommendations were released in a report, Report to the Congress: Medicare Payment Policy, available at <http://www.medpac.gov/>. Witness testimony came from Glenn M. Hackbarth, chairman of MedPAC, and a panel including

Daniel F. Evans, president and chief executive officer, Clarian Health Partners; Stephen L. Guillard, executive vice president, HCR-ManorCare; C. Anderson Hedberg, president, American College of Physicians; and Kent Thiry, chief executive officer, DaVita Patient Services. Additional written testimony was provided by the National Association for Home Care and Hospice, the American Medical Association, and the American Association for Homecare.

Hackbarth explained the three key themes in the MedPAC report: making sure that Medicare pays fairly and accurately and properly reflects the complexity of the patient; awarding improvements to quality; and encouraging improvements in efficiency of care. Johnson expressed concern that a large percentage of hospitals are losing money on Medicare patients. Rep. Fortney "Pete" Stark (D-Calif.), the panel's ranking member, said he was perplexed by the notion that hospitals are not going broke and that few hospitals are closing each year. During the panel discussion, Evans said Congress needs to deal with the workforce shortage because it is affecting efficiency and quality of patient care. Guillard expressed his concern that MedPAC's recommendations "are ill-advised, fail to accurately evaluate long-term care funding necessities, and will contribute to the deterioration of our nation's long-term care system at a time when every stakeholder can least afford it." Guillard added that if the MedPAC recommendations were implemented, they would jeopardize continued quality improvement. Further information on the testimony can be found at <http://waysandmeans.house.gov/hearings.asp?formmode=detail&hearing=464>.

Simplified Prescription Drug Plan Bill Introduced in Senate

On March 1, Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) and seven co-sponsors introduced the Medicare-Guaranteed Prescription Drug Act of 2006, S. 2342. The bill would establish a simplified prescription drug benefit program to be administered directly through Medicare. The bill is intended to alleviate some of the problems faced by seniors and individuals with disabilities in the Part D prescription drug benefit program. The proposed drug plan would be standardized with modest co-pays and deductibles, a uniform monthly premium regardless of where a beneficiary resides, and no coverage gap. It also includes language allowing the secretary of Health and Human Services to negotiate drug prices with pharmaceutical companies. More information is available at <http://thomas.loc.gov>.

Senate Clears Way for Action on LIHEAP Measure

On March 2, the Senate removed a procedural hurdle that had been holding up a vote on S. 2320, a bill that would move \$1 billion in Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) funds included in the Deficit Reduction Act (P.L. 109-171) from fiscal year 2007 to FY 2006. The bill was introduced last month by Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-Maine), and is supported by a coalition of other northern Republican Senators concerned about this winter's high heating fuel prices. Utility companies have also taken positions in favor of the bill. The Senate voted 66-31 to waive a point of order filed by the bill's opponents, who said moving the funds would violate budget caps. Observers said the strong vote signaled likely passage of S. 2320 next week. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) estimates that about 4.8 million families received LIHEAP assistance in 2003, only about 20 percent of those eligible. The energy law that Congress approved in 2005, P.L. 109-58, included a LIHEAP authorization of \$5.1 billion but appropriators have approved far less; LIHEAP spending has been about \$2.2 billion per year in FYs 2005 and 2006.

ACF Announces State Median Income Estimates for LIHEAP

On February 28, ACF announced FY 2007 state median income estimates for use under LIHEAP. LIHEAP grantees may begin using the new estimates immediately or at a later date. However, grantees using state median income as an income eligibility criterion must adjust their eligibility requirements to

be in accord with the FY 2007 estimates by October 1, 2006, or the beginning of the grantee's fiscal year, whichever is later. The notice was published in the February 28 Federal Register (71 FR 10037–10039) and is available at <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/index.html>.

Petoskey News Review article on ECIC

BY JEREMY MCBAIN

NEWS-REVIEW STAFF WRITER

The Charlevoix-Emmet Intermediate School District was awarded a \$90,000 grant Wednesday from the Early Childhood Investment Corp.

The grant will be used to strengthen the district's Stepping Stones to School program and do a needs assessment to determine the program's strengths and weaknesses. The grant is part of a total \$1.24 million in grants to fund 14 Great Start Collaboratives out of 39 intermediate school districts that applied. The funding for this grant comes from federal sources.

On top of getting the grant, Mike Foley, chief operating officer for Early Childhood Investment Corp., said of all the schools that applied for the grant and were awarded money, the Charlevoix-Emmet Stepping Stones program was rated as the top program in the state.

Marianne Udow, Early Childhood Investment Corporation board member, said the grants will help make sure all children in the state have a great start.

"What happens in early years has a permanent effect in later years," she said.

Udow said the state has heard from teachers of young children who say their students are coming to school not ready to learn and not prepared. However, programs like Charlevoix-Emmet's Stepping Stones to School hope to end that trend.

Stepping Stones to School is a network of agencies that provides services to families with children from birth to age 5.

Stepping Stones to School connects families with free services including:

- Playgroups to meet other families and children.
- Child development and vision screenings.
- Educational and fun activities at local schools.
- A free event line to call and hear about age-appropriate fun activities in local communities at (877) 866-3714.
- Newsletters with information on health, nutrition and fun activities.
- Birthday packets from the local school until a child reaches kindergarten.
- Home visits for infants from a registered nurse.

All services are free and families can register with Stepping Stones to School by calling 547-6216 or (877) 8766-3714.

Jeremy McBain can be contacted at 439-9316, or jmcbain@petoskeynews.com.



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING



MARIANNE UDOW
DIRECTOR

News Release

Contact: Stepheni Schlinker or Maureen Sorbet (517) 373-7394

Ingham County collaborative receives \$60,000 Great Start Collaborative grant

Early Childhood Investment Corporation grants focus on early childhood development and care

March 6, 2006

LANSING – Today the superintendent of the Ingham ISD joined board members of the Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) and local legislators to celebrate a \$60,000 grant to support a local Great Start Collaborative that will strengthen early childhood development and care in Ingham County.

Michigan Department of Human Services director Marianne Udow and ECIC chief operating officer Mike Foley presented a ceremonial check to Stanley Kogut, Ingham ISD Superintendent.

From the day she took office, Governor Jennifer M. Granholm has maintained that early childhood development and care is a critical investment in the economic viability of the state.

"Children learn more from birth to age three than at any other time, setting the stage for future success in school and in life," Granholm said. "High-quality early childhood development and care is a wise investment in our children and our economy."

The Early Childhood Investment Corporation, which the Governor announced in her 2005 State of the State address, is developing the framework for effective early childhood development and care programs through partnerships with local collaboratives around the state. The local Great Start Collaboratives will use the grant money from the ECIC to conduct a community assessment and develop a strategic plan for the development of a comprehensive system of early childhood services and supports, accessible to all children from birth to kindergarten and their families.

"These grants will help bring together the public and private sectors, including government, business, civic, faith, education, and community groups to develop a long-standing, sustained focus on early learning and childhood development," said Mike Foley. "The board was able to award this first round of grants with the resources currently available, and is committed to funding Great Start Collaboratives throughout the state as new funding sources are identified."

Intermediate school districts will act as fiduciaries for the grants. In addition to Ingham ISD, 13 other ISDs and RESAs around the state were also awarded funding for planning and/or implementation of Great Start Collaboratives.

-MORE-

“Children who participate in high-quality early childhood development programs are better prepared to enter elementary school, are more likely to pursue secondary education and have lower dropout rates and higher high school graduation rates,” DHS Director Marianne Udow said. “By improving the skills of a large fraction of the workforce, these programs for poor children will reduce poverty and strengthen the state’s ability to compete in the global market.”

For more information about the ECIC and Great Start collaboratives, visit the Project Great Start Web site at www.michigan.gov/greatstart

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JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
OFFICE OF CHILDREN AND ADULT LICENSING

LANSING



MARIANNE UDOW
DIRECTOR

News Release

Contact: Stepheni Schlinker or Maureen Sorbet (517) 373-7394

Michigan Department of Human Services Summarily Suspends a Group Day Care Home License in Eaton County

March 3, 2006

The Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS), Office of Children and Adult Licensing (OCAL) issued an order of summary suspension and notice of intent to revoke the license of Eaton County group day care home provider Debra Alexander, 8541 Doe Pass, Lansing, Michigan. This action resulted from a recent investigation of a complaint of the child day care group home.

The March 2, 2006, complaint investigation found violations of the Child Care Organizations Act and/or day care family home rules, **specifically the discipline and child handling rule. OCAL took immediate action to protect the health, welfare and safety of children.**

Effective 6:00 p.m., March 3, 2006, the Summary Suspension Order prohibits Debra Alexander from operating a group day care home at 8541 Doe Pass, Lansing, Michigan or at any other address or location. Accordingly, she may not accept children for care after that date and time. The order also requires Ms. Alexander to inform all of the parents of children in her care that her license has been suspended and that she can no longer provide day care.

Ms. Alexander has held a license to operate a group day care home since March 14, 2003. The license was for twelve children.

Michigan law defines a group day care home as a private home in which more than six but not more than 12 minor children are given care and supervision for periods of less than 24 hours a day, unattended by a parent or legal guardian, except children related to an adult member of the family by blood, marriage, or adoption. Group day care home includes a home that gives care to an unrelated minor child for more than four weeks during a calendar year.

For more information about DHS investigation and license suspension activities, consult the DHS Web site at www.michigan.gov/dhs.